DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 339 247 FL 800 281

AUTHOR Oxenham, John; French, Edward
TITLE Universities and Adult Literacy in South Africa: An Exploration of Their Relationship.
INSTITUTION Witwatersrand Univ. (South Africa).
REPORT NO ISBN-1-86814-181-0
PUB DATE Jul 90
NOTE 35p.
PUB TYPE Viewpoints (Opinion/Position Papers, Essays, etc.) (120) -- Reports - Descriptive (141)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC02 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Adult Literacy; *College Role; Foreign Countries; Higher Education; *Literacy Education; Minority Groups; Needs Assessment; Outreach Programs; *School Community Relationship; Social Change; Universities
IDENTIFIERS *South Africa

ABSTRACT

Observations of the relationship between South Africa's universities and adult literacy are offered by a British Council consultant after a visit to South Africa. The purpose was to help university lecturers design and develop an adult literacy course and to give seminars to local literacy groups. Impressions are described on the state of literacy, the state of methods and materials, the state of training, and the organization of literacy. It is concluded that the need for sound literacy is increasing with the accelerating pace of economic, social, and political change in the country, and that there remains a major role for universities as technical, advisory, and training supports to the many groups trying to reach the disadvantaged and illiterate. British Council-sponsored site visits and fellowships in Great Britain are suggested. A supporting essay by Edward French is included, as is the Zenex Adult Literacy Unit mission statement. (Adjunct ERIC Clearinghouse on Literacy Education) (LB)

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# universities and adult literacy in south africa

*an exploration of their relationship*

john oxenham

edward french

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FL600281

Published by the Zenex Adult Literacy Unit
Centre for Continuing Education
University of the Witwatersrand
July 1990

Copies may be ordered from:

The Zenex Adult Literacy Unit
CCE
PO WITS
2050

**ISBN 1-86814-181-0**

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# UNIVERSITIES AND ADULT LITERACY IN SOUTH AFRICA

## AN EXPLORATION OF THEIR RELATIONSHIP

**JOHN OXENHAM**

With an essay on the same subject by Edward French

Zenex Adult Literacy Unit
Centre for Continuing Education
University of the Witwatersrand

1990

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# INTRODUCTION:

# DR JOHN OXENHAM'S VISIT TO SOUTH AFRICA

In 1987 the British Council approached the Division of Adult Education at the University of the Witwatersrand with an offer to bring out a specialist in adult literacy for a short visit. The Division was asked to put forward some names. The first on the list was that of Dr John Oxenham. We felt that we were daringly optimistic in the choice of so eminent a person, and were therefore surprised and gratified when he accepted the invitation.

John Oxenham led the literacy campaign in Zambia in the late 60s; this was subsequently awarded Unesco's Nadezhda Krupskaya prize for excellence in the promotion of literacy. After playing a leading role in the Turkish national literacy campaign and its evaluation, he undertook an impressive array of consultancies in many countries in the East, in Africa and in the Americas. He is the author of one of the most eloquent books on world literacy and of many studies and papers on education and development. Based at the University of Sussex, he is currently running a three-year programme in development leadership at the World Bank in Washington.

At the time of his visit in August 1988, we were in the midst of planning what was to become the Zenex Adult Literacy Unit, and therefore requested the British Council and Dr Oxenham to focus his observations on the question of the role of the academic world in adult literacy in South Africa. We organized an intensive programme to initiate him as quickly as possible into the adult literacy situation here. Before coming he read key documents, including the Division of Adult Education's report on a South African literacy organizations seminar written by international literacy consultant, Edwin Townsend-Coles.

Shortly after arriving John Oxenham participated in three day-long seminars which introduced him to many of the leaders in all sectors of literacy work. Having acquainted himself with the politics, aspirations and frustrations of this contentious field, he then visited adult literacy classes in suburbs, townships and mine hostels. After this he spent several days in related meetings and observations in Cape Town and at Rhodes University. Much of his time was spent in listening, always with concern and insight.

He did not only listen. We benefited at Wits from two fine and entertaining addresses on the idea of "deschooling" and on his experience of literacy work. (His asides on his acquaintance with luminaries in the field like Ivan Illich and Paulo Freire were especially refreshing.) He concluded his visit with a number of extended consultations about the university's involvement in adult literacy.

During the last days of his visit Dr Oxenham wrote the first draft of the report which is published here. The report was a formal account to the British Council and was not intended for publication. Nonetheless, we felt it worth disseminating for a number of reasons: First, of course, is the interest of the opinion of so distinguished a consultant on our situation and plans. Secondly, as Edward French points out in the article which we have added to Dr Oxenham's report, universities here have made a minor contribution to

adult literacy promotion, and the subject of their relationship to the field has scarcely been explored. We hope that this small publication will help by reflecting the start of a process which must surely grow significantly over the coming "international decade of literacy".

Most important in "International Literacy Year", Dr Oxenham's report is a contribution to the debate about how literacy is to be promoted in South Africa after Apartheid. This debate has scarcely started and must intensify if literacy is to play its rightful role in the future of our country.

We are indeed grateful to the British Council for making Dr John Oxenham's visit and assignment possible at a crucial planning stage in the establishment of the Zenex Adult Literacy Unit in the University of the Witwatersrand's Centre for Continuing Education. His research, development and "delivery" recommendations are being vigorously implemented by the unit's Coordinator, Edward French. Moreover, the British Council has acted, and continues to act, on specific suggestions made by John Oxenham for the informed international exchange of experiences in the field of adult literacy in South Africa.

Professor D D Russell
Director, Centre for Continuing Education
Head, Division of Adult Education in the Faculty of Education

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# UNIVERSITIES AND ADULT LITERACY IN SOUTH AFRICA: AN EXPLORATION OF THEIR RELATIONSHIP

## OBSERVATIONS AFTER A BRITISH COUNCIL VISIT

John Oxenham

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Only when I had arrived at the Centre for Continuing Education and Division of Adult Education of the University of the Witwatersrand and met Dr Peter Devries and Mr. Edward French did I discover why I in particular had been invited to undertake the assignment reported here. It was what most authors would find gratifying, namely that people had read my book on literacy and social organization and thought that I might be worth meeting. I am complimented and most grateful for that judgement and much obliged to the British Council for acting on it. My time with the three universities of the Witwatersrand, Cape Town and Rhodes and with the many organizations to whom they have introduced me has been not only of extraordinary interest and reward but also of warm encouragement. That so much can be ventured and done within such political and financial limitations as obtain today in the Republic of South Africa, is humbling to those who either come from less troubled circumstances or have seen elsewhere how efforts like these can be crushed - if indeed they are even allowed to begin. The vitality, energy and sparkle of these organizations and of the people who organize them - LM at

Funda in Soweto, Learn and Teach, Prolit in Pretoria, READ, SACHED, USWE, who are to be found everywhere - recharge the energies of educators fortunate to encounter them.

In personal terms I am greatly in the debt of Dr Peter Devries and Mr Sipho Mahlobo, who met me on my arrival and introduced me to Wits, Johannesburg, Katlehong and Soweto; and of Mr Edward French who organized all the seminars and visits to literacy groups and sponsoring organizations in Johannesburg, Soweto, Carltonville and Pretoria - morning, noon and night! Apart from the actual business of my visit, they were exceedingly generous in their hospitality and leisure time: I have to hope that I shall have the opportunity to repay them, when they in their turns visit the United Kingdom. I must also hope that they found their time and patience not ill used. Supporting them were the kindly and sage counsel and assistance of Professor Denzil Russell, Mrs Jean McKie Thompson, Mrs Joan Vinjevold and Mrs Molly Orr, to whom I owe my ability to use the departmental word processor.

At the University of Cape Town, my mentors were Mrs Nancy Murray and Mr Salie Abrahams, backed by Professor Clive Millar. Again, the full programme of seminars and field visits to organizations and groups both lifted the mind and heart and regenerated the vision of what is possible, given commitment, courage and perseverance. And again, the generosity with time and hospitality were comprehensive. Two particular privileges must be mentioned. Professor Millar arranged for me a special seat-without-ticket for a sold-out performance of the musical tragedy, "District Six", which I rejoice not to have missed; and Mrs Murray and Mr Abrahams educated me in the flora, fauna and geography to be studied on and from the high flats of the Table Mountain.

For the sessions at Rhodes University in Grahamstown, I was particularly grateful to be met and transported by Messrs Charles Nuttall and David Langen, for the distance between the nearest airport and the university is not

easily walked or even taxied. Even more important, of course, was the initiative of Charles Nuttall in securing for me the privilege of having discussions with Professors Len Lanham and Paul Walters and their staff on "Breakthrough" and "Bridge", which will be discussed more fully below. Once again, I have to express my warm thanks for a reception so friendly and hospitable.

Although it was never needed, the assurance of the British Council's safety net in the welcoming persons of - in Johannesburg - Messrs Rainey Colgan and David Higgs, Dr Jos Johnston in Cape Town and, of course, Charles Nuttall in Grahamstown was good to have. When they receive the informal streams of feedback on my contributions at various seminars and discussions at the three universities, I hope they will feel justified in their initiatives and support.

## TERMS OF REFERENCE

The terms of reference for this assignment were drawn up in early 1987. At that time, the universities of the Witwatersrand and Cape Town hoped to have been able to establish units for the support of work in adult literacy. On that assumption, the following terms of reference were transmitted to me:

"Adult Literacy Course, University of the Witwatersrand."

1. Objective:
   - To assist in the design of an Adult Literacy course at university level.
   - To advise the Adult Education Division on the curriculum, content, etc of the planned course and on the drawing up of a syllabus.
   - The course would serve a need in South Africa for the training at tertiary level of literacy educators.
2. Requirements:

- To work with university lecturers towards the realization of the above objective.
- To give seminars to local literacy groups and the heads of literacy projects in the non-formal sector."

However, both universities had for various reasons been prevented from completing their plans, so that neither support unit had been set up nor had any staff appointment made. Consequently, both were still in the process of deciding the precise functions of their units and asked for my views on their thoughts, after they had arranged opportunities for me to study what was happening in the field. Clearly, neither was yet in a position to discuss details of syllabuses or courses. Indeed, the likelihood is that there is more than sufficient expertise in both universities to set up the courses without external contributions, once the requisite staff appointments are in place. My role in regard to Wits and Cape Town, then, was simply to observe and enquire about as much as I could, in order to contribute to their final decisions on what they should best be doing in support of literacy in their local constituencies and in South Africa generally.

However, both universities - or rather their Departments of Adult Education - did want me to take part in a number of seminars with ranges of organizations involved with literacy and other human development work and I was naturally happy to comply.

The Institute for the Study of English in Africa and the Molteno Project at Rhodes University had a somewhat different use for me. They have developed exciting materials and methods for teaching several African languages in primary schools along the lines of the British Schools Council's "Breakthrough". So successful have these been, that some organizations dealing with adult literacy have tried them out with adult classes and find they work pretty well, even though they and their accompanying materials

are designed for young children. Naturally, ISEA and Molteno want to adapt the method and particularly the supplementary materials more closely to the interests of adults and wanted to know whether I had any thoughts on the subject.

Their further project - for which the British Council has now provided the assistance of a full-time language officer - is developing the cognate approach to learning English: "Bridge To English", "Bridge Plus One" and "Bridge Plus Two". As with "Breakthrough", they wanted to discuss possibilities of transforming approaches and materials developed for children into something more attractive to adults.

For ISEA and Molteno, then, my brief was more modest. It was, however, much influenced by what I had been able to study at classes offered by Rand Mines at Carltonville and by Prolit in Pretoria, of which a little more later.

## IMPRESSIONS

The digest of impressions offered below is drawn from the short studies I was enabled to make of the groups listed below and from the eight seminars and the discussions in which I was invited to participate over the three weeks of my stay.

Cape Town:
Using Spoken and Written English (USWE), one group of English Instructors in training to teach English to Health Workers in the Khayalitsha shanty town.

Carltonville:
Rand Mines Training, 4 groups learning literacy in Zulu and Tswana, 3 using materials from LITSA (1969) and 1 using "Breakthrough to Xhosa".

Johannesburg:
Learn and Teach, 2 groups learning English;
Using Spoken and Written English (USWE), one group learning English.

Katlehong:
Aaron Moeti Adult Centre at the High School: several groups following the Matriculation syllabus in preparation for the exam.

Pretoria:
Pro-Lit, 2 groups at different stages of using "Breakthrough" materials for literacy in the mother-tongue

Soweto:
Lembede Mda (LM) at Funda, 5 groups varying from literacy in the mother-tongue, using materials from Learn and Teach, to fairly advanced groups studying for Matriculation.

These studies of learning groups were of course preceded and succeeded by orientations and discussions with their sponsoring organizations, and, where possible, with the actual instructors.

**The State of Literacy:**

Statistics adduced by a number of people suggest that between 5 and 7 million adults between the ages of 15 and 65 years in the Republic of South Africa and its associated satellite "homelands" are illiterate in any language. The overwhelming majority of these are from the black communities and the majority of these live in the rural areas. However, a substantial and probably increasing minority live and work in the large cities and towns. As South Africa is a relatively urbanized, industrialized and almost completely monetized market polity, where the written law and printed documents are

vitally important in ascertaining and securing one's rights and interests, such a degree of illiteracy cannot but be regarded as a problem. It is complicated by the fact that literacy in one of the Bantu languages is of very limited use outside domestic communication, valuable as they can be to a miner or domestic worker who wishes to write or send money to a rural home. To be "functionally literate" in South African society at large, a person needs to be literate in English or Afrikaans.

An understandable expectation would be that a large and persistent demand for instruction in literacy would have pressed so hard, that a comprehensive set of programmes to meet it would be in operation, and that those programmes would be over-subscribed and that attendance and perseverance would be at high levels. Confounding such an expectation is the estimate that fewer than one per cent of the potential clientele is enrolled in all of the several programmes on offer and the observation that some - but certainly not all - of the programmes are not fully subscribed and display less than maximum rates of attendance and completion. One voluntary organization acknowledged that there did not seem to be an urgently felt need for literacy, that even organizations like trades unions did not seem to take literacy seriously, that the attendance of the learners themselves was irregular and that the circumstances of many learners forced them to give literacy a low priority. In contrast, two other voluntary organizations were indeed unable to cope with the demands upon them and one could demonstrate very high rates of regular attendance. The circumstances of the other's learners caused attendance to fluctuate.

Accentuating the apparent contradiction between need and take-up are two facts. The first is that most of the initiatives to provide opportunities for literacy are undertaken by white and relatively comfortably off people. I was introduced to only two organizations which had originated with black people and at the seminars on literacy whites predominated. Is literacy seen as only a secondary or even third rank priority in the population group which ap-

pears to need it most? The second fact is that among the largest programmes with the largest enrollments are those of bodies often depicted as enemies and exploiters of the people, namely the South African government's Department of Education and Training and the gold mining companies. I am not in a position to comment on the former's classes since I did not see any. However, if what I saw of the latter's programme at Carltonville is representative of the general 'private sector' situation, it would appear that these efforts, while not massively enrolled, do sustain their attendance at respectable levels and are effective in enabling their learners to attain modest goals of writing letters and understanding uncomplicated bills.

Could it be the case that these programmes are populated by those whose basic needs for food, shelter and so on are adequately met and who live nearby, so that they have the peace of mind and the leisure to pursue literacy; while the programme designed for and even with the very poor and insecure simply cannot be given the full attention of their clientele, because other more basic needs are pressing? If this hypothesis has any validity whatever, the indication would be that the 'literacy' organizations might consider whether they could transform themselves into 'development' agencies, able to introduce literacy, after more lively priorities had been settled?

Whatever the reasons behind the lack of take-up and perseverance, it is worth recalling that these phenomena are the common lot of 'pure', 'functional' and even 'conscientising' literacy work around the world. They are common to all kinds of adult education and even the pioneering Open Universities are not exempt. In short, they are not unique to efforts by voluntary or other agencies in South Africa working for the education of disadvantaged adults. While ways to combat them should certainly be sought and developed, they should not be permitted to discourage those who seek to help adults educate themselves.

**The state of Methods and Materials:**

At least six different sets of materials and three different approaches are in use for teaching literacy in either the mother-tongue or a second language. Four sets seem to concentrate on helping the learners master the skills of reading, writing and counting and then leaving them to apply them as they will; while two are equally concerned with educating the learners to be aware of their legal and occupational rights and of the many injustices which can be perpetrated upon them because of their ignorance and uncertainty. Three strive to build literacy upon vocabulary frequently and presently used by the learners, while the other three, rather older, sets seem to give priority to the technicalities of literacy, although they do of course have to make sense. A seventh set - in Afrikaans - was devised for the Adult Basic Education Research and Development Project run by the Department of Adult Education and Extramural Studies of Cape Town University from 1983 to 1987; but I did not have an opportunity to examine any of its products. As far as I could ascertain, this was the only set and approach to be systematically monitored and evaluated and the ensuing publications are in press at the moment - there should be many valuable lessons to be observed. (See endnote.)

None of the organizations I encountered appears to be fully satisfied with the materials it has been able to devise or locate. At least one organization, originating from a black initiative, finds the older sets dull, but is uneasy about the 'confrontational' nature of some of the newer and livelier materials. Given the voluntary nature of most of these organizations, the difficulty with which they struggle to attract resources, the commitment and energy they devote to their mission and given that they are front-line workers compelled to undertake also the functions of the back-stops; it is singularly unfortunate that they have nowhere local to supply them with the lessons culled from around the world and across the political spectrum. At the seminars in Johannesburg, Pretoria and Cape Town, the complaint was common and repeated that these 'action people' and practitioners had no

authoritative source of guidance on what might be best in terms of approaches, methods or content for different groups of adults at different stages of social, occupational, education or political maturation. Much time, much waste and much disappointment might have been and might still be avoided, if there could be a centre charged with gathering the fruits of experience in South Africa, as well as in the wider world, so that - to switch metaphors - wheels which have been invented and broken elsewhere, needed not be invented again, only to be broken once more.

For at least the past three decades, promoters of literacy programmes have stressed the need to ensure a substantial and steady supply of 'follow-on' materials at every stage of instruction. The purpose is of course to provide neophyte readers with further stimulus, reinforcement of skills, confirmation that literacy is useful and enriching and encouragement to advance to greater mastery. Unfortunately, although the Bureau of Literacy (LITSA) and Operation Upgrade have been in the field for a considerable time they have not been able to build an adequately extensive range of 'follow-on' booklets. Consequently, there is a widespread complaint about the difficulties of keeping new readers reading and interested. The "Breakthrough" series do indeed carry with them their own supplementary booklets, but they are, of course, intended for children and, though useful, of somewhat limited interest for adults.

**The State of Training:**

Even more strongly than the complaint about methods and materials was sounded the complaint about the lack of an authoritative source of training for the originators and trainers of literacy organizations. People lament their having had to learn largely by their own trial and error in a field where there has been so much earlier and very expensive trial and error by others.

Training is demanded for:

- assessing the real strength and priority of demands for literacy vis à vis the pulls of other obligations and needs;
- gauging needs or pressures of which potential learners may not themselves be conscious;
- assessing what might appeal most effectively to particular groups of potential learners;
- designing activities attractive for groups of adults; guiding authors in what might appeal to beginning and slightly more advanced readers;
- mastering the array of skills for enabling others to master literacy and other educational skills;
- training potential instructors of varying scholastic backgrounds, abilities, attitudes and social skills to become effective with groups striving for literacy;
- managing the conduct and morale of a literacy project; maintaining interest, attendance and perseverance to completion.

In all these areas, where much experience does exist, the voluntary organizations of South Africa complain that nothing is easily and locally available for them.

**The Organization of Literacy:**

An interesting, indeed stimulating and challenging, feature of work for literacy in South Africa is the variegation of the organizations involved. There is of course the government. There are also the large industrial and commercial firms, which cater for their own employees. Next are those voluntary organizations which are not in sympathy with one or both of the first two groups, but which nevertheless maintain contact with them, accept help from them, where appropriate, and attempt to influence their policies and programmes. Some of their own work is impressively creative, thorough

and effective. Its emphasis seems to be on mastery of language skills and on helping learners reach their own academic goals within the prevailing systems of credentials. The group appears to refrain from including agenda of its own in the curricula it offers.

The fourth group is also voluntary but as a matter of policy holds itself aloof from both government and "capital", on the ground that the one is a tyranny and illegitimate, while the other is interested in the education of the workers only in so far as it increases its control over them and subjugates them to its own profit. The materials produced by this group tend to focus on the rights, maltreatment and grievances of different sets of workers and on the injustices perpetrated by agencies which are supposed to protect and serve the people. This fourth group is suspicious of the third's collaboration with the first two, being intensely sensitive to the perils of being co-opted into "the system". Its members tend to feel that any adult education must be totally rejected, which does not make it its business to create or heighten awareness of the tyranny and exploitation of the current political and economic regime in South Africa. They frankly accept that they may be imposing their own agenda on learners, but feel that there is no other way of showing the latter what options may be open to them. If I am not misinterpreting them, their view seems to hold that no education is preferable to incomplete education; which would appear at variance with Gandhi's advice that, "It is better to light a candle than to curse the darkness." Not surprisingly, communication between the two sets of voluntary organizations seems to be tentative and wary.

The fact that there are four broad groupings and within three of them several independent and disparate organizations might suggest that literacy work is fragmented and possibly the worse for it. That is not my impression. The scale of disadvantage, underdevelopment and illiteracy is large enough to allow for a variety of approaches without either duplication or competition.

Indeed, from a selfishly academic perspective, such a range of energetic experiment and effort provides a rich lode for assessment, evaluation, action, research and fresh development.

## CONCLUSIONS

From these impressions the ready inference is that the universities of South Africa could have had a major role in helping the many organizations concerned with literacy to benefit systematically from their own current efforts. *A fortiori* since the need for sound literacy is actually increasing *pari passu* with the accelerating pace of economic, social and political change in the country, there remains a major role for them as technical, advisory and training supports to the many and variegated front and second line groups straining to reach the disadvantaged and illiterate.

A populist but nevertheless valid watchword for the universities could be what one of the Cape Town faculty termed "RD&D", to wit, Research, Development and Delivery, with particular stress on the Delivery. As one of the first steps to provide an adequate and credible foundation for their support, the universities will need to fulfil the first of their three prime functions, namely to generate a comprehensive programme of 'action', applied, experimental and pure research in virtually all aspect of organizing, teaching and learning literacy. This should afford them the expertise and insight from which training and advice could be offered, and from which useful publications might be disseminated. The opportunities for research of several kinds are legion.

As already remarked, there are no fewer than six sets of literacy materials in use: *comparative* and necessarily *cooperative research* on their application, response to them and on their effectiveness in assisting both the learners and the organizers to attain their respective goals should be relatively easy to design and implement.

Bound up with this would be the *methodological challenges* of designing ways of evaluating and assisting cognitive and other forms of learning without interrupting learning processes - unobtrusive measures. Long term *tracer studies* of what graduates of literacy courses do with their literacy would offer another avenue of insight. Although it might be needless to mention the point, the opportunities for *inter-departmental* and *inter-disciplinary research* would also be numerous.

As interesting as the literacy learners are the people who are trained to instruct them. What *training methods* really do help what sorts of people to cope with the needs of adults trying to learn literacy through particular approaches? Tracer studies on what instructors tend to do with their training and why, could help literacy organizations refine their criteria for permitting potential instructors to engage in training.

There is much scope also for RD&D in methods of *reliably assessing the needs* of learners and gauging just how important and useful literacy could be to them in their current circumstances; and whether literacy should be delayed until other, more urgent needs are met.

This issue is perhaps particularly important with *rural communities*. Literacy does not impinge so obviously upon their daily and domestic life, even though it is increasingly visible through the multiplying uses of industrial products. Accordingly, extra care needs to be taken in designing development-cum-literacy programmes for them.

The day-to-day *management* of literacy projects is yet another aspect which would bear investigation; the quality of management does seem to be a factor in the retention of both teachers and learners, but its relative importance seems not to have been assessed.

In the realm of developing supplementary materials, the universities could *design or run workshops* for potential authors in writing lively and interesting booklets and articles within controlled vocabularies for new readers. They could at the same time liaise with publishers on how such authors might be encouraged.

Enabling others to publish for neo-literates would not of course dispense the universities from their own *obligation to make known to the world at large* the insights and understanding they have distilled from their studies or work in South Africa. While the emphasis should certainly be put on publications of direct use and application to practitioners in South Africa - they would after all be the prime suppliers of the fresh understanding and so entitled to learn the lessons derived from their efforts - the occasional journal article and even more occasional book should be put out for the benefit of the rest of the world's literacy and development workers.

The universities could also consider how they might *enable* articulate *practitioners* to write down and publish their concrete experience in forms that could assist their co-workers in the field. Support for short Visiting Fellowships of 3 to 6 months might be feasible.

Finally, of course, these programmes of varied research, experimentation and training should strengthen the capacity of the universities to offer excellent options in literacy as part of their *graduate studies* in Adult Education. In turn, graduate students, some of them perhaps drawn from literacy and development practitioners, would be able to contribute to the accumulation of insight and expertise.

These activities should certainly enable the universities to form rich *repositories of documentation* on which workers and scholars alike could draw.

These impressions and conclusions were put before the respective faculties of the three universities and discussed at some length. I was naturally pleased that all three found my impressions by and large, sound, and some at least of my proposals much in line with what they themselves had been contemplating - for them, as for most people, outside confirmation is always pleasant to hear.

## CAN THE BRITISH COUNCIL BE OF EVEN MORE USE?

The three universities - and doubtless others - and the constellation of voluntary and industrial/commercial bodies working on the problems of literacy in South Africa form a formidable force of experience and expertise, who stand in no need of external advice; although indeed many of them rely very substantially on external finance and welcome external assistance with money, materials and equipment. However, a number of their members do feel isolated from wider pools of expertise and practice in the world and would welcome opportunities for field studies abroad.

The British Council already provides a full-time officer to help with the Molteno Project, has provided books and equipment for a number of organizations and operates a number of cross-visits, whereby South African scholars study in the U.K. and British scholars study or work in South Africa. So the principles, policies and framework for supplying what South African literacy workers might find helpful are already in place. The question seems simply whether the exchanges might be usefully multiplied, when the universities have their literacy support units well established.

Two possibilities might be worth considering:

1. Short visits from British practitioners to work with South African Practitioner Visiting Fellows on refining and completing their projects. The British would in effect be supplementary tutors to their South African counterparts.

2. These visits might be an element in a larger scheme whereby the British Council could help finance 3-month Visiting Fellowships at Wits, Cape Town or Rhodes as *preparations* for a similar purpose and period in Britain.

ENDNOTE:

The University of Cape Town studies were published at the end of 1988; they are:

WEDEPOHL, LINDA. *Learning from a literacy project* . Cape Town: David Phillip.

ADULT BASIC EDUCATION PROJECT. *Group leaders' notes: a guide for literacy teachers* . Cape Town: David Phillip.

# THE UNIVERSITY AND ADULT LITERACY: TOWARDS A NEW RELATIONSHIP?

Edward French

The United Nations proclaimed 1990 *International Literacy Year* to focus attention once again on the plight of the estimated 950 million illiterate people in the world, and especially to gain the commitment of governments and influential agencies like the academic world and business leadership to a decade of concerted literacy promotion.

Strangely, considering how central literacy is to the task of universities, their direct and explicit contribution to the wider spread of literacy has been slight. There would seem to be compelling reasons for this not to be the case. In the first place, language shapes our world, and the written word is the most enduringly powerful form of language. Literacy itself has become a fascinating subject of study scattered across various disciplines like social history, ethnography and psychology, while those involved in promoting literacy find themselves engaged in some of the most contentious issues of our time - issues which range from theories of culture and development to the nature of knowledge and its relationship to power.

This article looks at the role that universities have played in literacy work abroad and in South Africa. It then outlines some attempts to make appropriate contributions in a number of our universities, and specifically at Wits.

The idea of universal literacy has carried with it immense hopes for salvation, enlightenment, modernization and liberation. Literacy has been promoted by missionaries, activists and enthusiastic members of international development bureaucracies, by Luther, Tolstoy, Paulo Freire and by most socialist movements. Unlike formal education, adult literacy work has been fairly resistant to permanence and institutionalization. It has remained largely in the realm of spirited "alternatives". Because it is so often linked to an egalitarian concern with the poor and the oppressed, there is a tendency among literacy agencies to resist incorporation in professional hierarchies. In those cases where literacy has been promoted by centralized bureaucracies the outcome seems to be ambiguous: innovative approaches may be more thoroughly designed, but technicism replaces commitment and a responsiveness to local cultures. There are disadvantages to "non-formality", however: an orientation to the short term, frequent failures to move beyond the literacy soup kitchen to more substantial and permanent learning, difficulties in identifying and dealing with wider social problems that affect their work, and doctrinaire or narrowly-focused responses to complex issues in the implementation of innovation.

If this analysis is valid, it suggests that there are important roles for universities in literacy promotion, but also that there must be tensions in the relationship. However, it is difficult to obtain extensive information about universities and adult literacy work, especially because of our lack of contact with South American and Asian universities in contexts where there might have been real contributions. On the whole, academic studies and evaluations of literacy work have been done either by Unesco or the International Institute for Adult Literacy Methods in Tehran, or in universities as a subsidiary aspect of subjects like development studies. While various universities in the UK and the USA have been the site of studies of literacy work, there would seem to be very few with divisions dedicated specifically to literacy work (as opposed to the extensive, largely American, institution of reading research).

There are some notable exceptions: Until recently the University of Reading maintained a comprehensive international resource centre on literacy work. Important studies of literacy programmes have been produced in some of the newer British universities, where the growth of subjects like adult education and applied linguistics has provided a supportive context for the subject. The Summer School of Linguistics (USA, North Carolina) has been the home for intensive studies related to literacy mission work. The School was mainly concerned with creating written forms and texts for unwritten languages, but it also developed adult literacy methods structured on (now contested) linguistic principles. A major exception is Syracuse University. Syracuse (NY) is home to the two largest literacy organizations in the USA, Laubach International and Literacy Volunteers of America. The university has contributed specialized knowledge to these organizations in terms of reading and text development. It also maintains a major international resource base on adult literacy, and a system of grants enables students from abroad to use the facility. The University of Indiana has created a place for the Indian and international leader in literacy work, Dr H.S. Bhola.

Even without a specific commitment to the promotion of literacy, universities have contributed to the field. Various universities provided a base for Paulo Freire to develop his influential "emancipatory praxis" of literacy work. And in general, literacy work is informed by critiques of education and society and by learning theory developed in universities. Unfortunately, exploratory and tentative theory often degenerates into dogma and slogan in the field. This may inhibit rather than promote effective practices. The phenomenon is linked to the too great disengagement of university theorizing from the world of practice.

Setting aside the promotion of literacy, the past thirty years have seen a steady growth in academic studies of the nature and politics of literacy and its impact on societies, past and present. These studies have enriched and deepened our understanding of a phenomenon that for most of its history has

been taken for granted. Many of the studies qualify the grander claims about literacy; taken together they leave one with a sense of humility because they reveal the scarcely fathomable complexities of a social institution that we tend to regard as a simple set of skills. The Universities of Toronto and Cambridge are most closely associated with work of this kind. Cambridge University Press publishes a series on literacy and society containing many of the major inquiries in this field.

South Africa and its universities have scarcely been touched by these concerns. At the time of international fervour for literacy, adult literacy work was suppressed in South Africa. It is still the most marginal aspect of a direly inadequate education provision. The study of literacy and society has been pursued by four scholars in small and isolated projects in the late 80s. The explicit contribution of academia to literacy work can be listed in a short space.

Probably the most striking early contribution of an academic to literacy work in South Africa was that of Prof Eddie Roux of Wits in the thirties and after. Eddie Roux's work was linked not to his academic concerns but to his work in night schools organized by the Communist Party. A recent study of his work completed at UCT shows a demanding conception of literacy well beyond the soup kitchen. In the forties and fifties the Institute of Race Relations set up the first dedicated literacy organization. There was a close but informal relationship with staff and departments at Wits which helped to give shape to an enduring project. Over the years these ties grew tenuous. In the seventies an attempt at regional coordination of scattered literacy projects was located partly in Wits, and the university commissioned a report from the noted American literacy specialist, Dr K.L. Baucom into the possible role of the university in literacy work. At the same time two post-graduate studies were in progress; these were related to the evaluation of literacy programmes, one of them among the workers at Wits. Neither Baucom's study nor the post-graduate work bore fruit, and those involved

were left with a certain skepticism about the university's interest in the field. It was only with the growth of departments of Adult Education in the eighties that a location for adult literacy work came into being.

The first lengthy academic study of literacy work was made by the University of the Orange Free State: a two volume report on international and African trends in literacy work completed in 1978. The report does not relate directly to the South African experience. The UOFS has the most comprehensive data base for non-formal education in the country. Second was the work on literacy in South Africa at the HSRC, where a range of reports, articles, studies and seminars were produced through the eighties.

The only major university work on literacy with local relevance was conducted at UCT, where a rural action project between 1983 and 1987 yielded reports and two very interesting and practical books. The project uncovered tensions between the demands of action in an oppressed and needy community and the demands in academic inquiry for elite discourse and publication. But it also revealed the potential in the tension: the capacity of the university to encourage and support innovation in the community and to disseminate what was learnt for successor projects, the fruitfulness of the pressure to make the outcome of inquiry accessible, and the contribution of community involvement to the university's understanding of its changing relationship to our society.

Before considering recent literacy initiatives at some South African universities it will help to look briefly at the adult literacy situation in the country. Adult literacy may constitute the largest single block of educational need, with an estimated five million people who lack basic literacy and another seven million who only benefit from the simplest texts. A wide range of agencies work for adult literacy, but they enjoy little priority in the allocation of educational resources, and in any one year less than one percent of potential clients are reached by literacy services. Literacy work is confronted by

enormous problems: the conditions of daily life and work, the low quality of teaching and materials, lack of sustaining support structures, the political divisiveness which faces all development work in the country, the failure to develop literacy leadership in the client communities themselves and a lack of real interest among the powerful are just some of the limitations of current literacy work. There are notable exceptions to these conditions, but no literacy project escapes them all.

There is a further limitation to literacy in South Africa. The politics of print favour an elite of proficient readers, reflect metropolitan interests, and are distorted by a heavily controlled schooling market and a history of exclusion. The task of promoting literacy cannot be divorced from the struggle for a more democratic text development which makes concessions to limitations in reading proficiency.

Five universities now have projects linked to literacy work. Apart from occasional teaching and supervision, they are engaged in:

- offering support and information to community projects (Natal, Western Cape),
- working with experimental programmes in rural villages and providing a springboard for an independent regional drive for literacy (Unibo, Wits Rural Facility),
- focusing on the publication of a range of academic and popular books on literacy (Cape Town).

The most ambitious project is the Zenex Adult Literacy Unit in the Centre for Continuing Education at Wits. Its plans for the decade of literacy were based on extended negotiation and local and international advice. The unit started operation in March 1989. In its first year it has

- established a resource centre,
- offered courses and presentations in and beyond the university,

- published articles on literacy,
- set up *The ERA Initiative* , an association to promote "Easy Reading for Adults",
- initiated work on a literacy film,
- supervised relevant research projects,
- promoted inter-university collaboration on literacy,
- provided strategic support for regional literacy leadership,
- provided advice and consultation to numerous institutions and individuals,
- set out on a study of adult literacy policy for a new South Africa,
- planned with other agencies a mobile literacy facility to take resources to isolated areas.

At all of our universities together exactly seven people have been appointed to work on literacy; only three of the posts are full time, none has assured permanence. Studies in Aramaic are better supported. As Dr Oxenham's suggestions show, the university has resources and status which can be put to the service of a literate South Africa. The endeavour deserves far more support than it gets at present.

# THE ZENEX ADULT LITERACY UNIT

# A MISSION STATEMENT

## MISSION

To promote literacy by functioning as a centre of influence aimed at enhancing the quality, quantity and impact of adult literacy provision nationwide, in urban and rural contexts.

## LOCATION

The unit is situated in the Centre for Continuing Education (CCE) of the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg. Through community adult education programmes and a range of research and development projects concerned with raising the quality of education the CCE takes the resources of the university out into the community and brings the community into the university.

## OBJECTIVES

- To act as an information and resource centre; by keeping abreast of developments both at home and abroad, the Unit will be in a position to promote the flow of information and to act as a link between agencies.
- To provide advice, guidance and evaluation services where these do not duplicate the work of existing bodies.

- To raise the quality of in-field training, and to increase the number of informed and resourceful people taking a leading role in the field, through teaching in relevant programmes in the university's Faculty of Education and Centre for Continuing Education.
- To assist people involved in adult literacy work to evaluate their approaches so that current and future projects can benefit from the experience.
- To publicize the need for literacy work where little is being done and to initiate and support action to meet this need.
- To participate in the establishment of adult literacy projects through consultation, guidance and encouragement.
- To organize presentations, seminars, workshops and training programmes aimed at promoting literacy in South Africa.
- To promote appropriate research into adult literacy.
- To mobilize the production of a wide range of reading matter to serve the interests of newly-literate adults.

ZENEX ADULT LITERACY UNIT

Centre for Continuing Education

UNIVERSITY OF THE WITWATERSRAND
JOHANNESBURG
1990

ISBN 1-86814-181-0

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CAMERA PRESS 12544